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Medicine: Outbreak alert: A new strain of an old disease affecting cats

In Los Angeles last month, there was an outbreak of a disease causing death in 30 cats. This outbreak was reported on the news and we have received some very anxious inquiries.

This disease, which is believed to be a new strain of Calici Virus, is responsible. The normal strain of Calici Virus causes upper respiratory signs including congestion, sneezing, runny eyes, and severe gingivitis. The new strain causes worse symptoms including jaundice, high fevers, limb swelling, hair loss, anorexia, and death. The Calici Virus vaccine (part of the FCVPR vaccine) is not effective against this new strain.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the disease appears to be self-limited. It killed those unfortunate cats so quickly that there's been no evidence of spread at this time and there is no risk to human health. The shelter medicine specialist in charge of the outbreak Dr. Kate Hurley (who is a good friend of Dr. Horn's) believes the outbreak contained.

What should you do? At this time, you shouldn't need to worry, but all cats coming from pet stores and shelters are exposed to disease and frequently do get sick. Luckily these are generally easy to treat and they get over the symptoms quickly. Proper precautions should always be taken with new kittens if you already have a cat. If you adopt a new kitten, keep it isolated for at least 5 days from your other cats. After playing or feeding the kitten, wash your hands well and change your clothes. Washing with a 1:32 bleach/water solution is best. If your kitten has upper respiratory symptoms, your veterinarian should see them. If you think they are showing the more severe listed symptoms, they should be seen immediately.